

U.S. Fears Baltic Crisis Will Hurt Moscow Ties

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Special to The N.Y. Times

WASHINGTON, March 31 — Even before Mikhail S. Gorbachev's latest attempt today to halt Lithuanian secession, Bush Administration and Congressional officials were expressing concern that the crisis in Lithuania was disrupting efforts to bring the United States military budget, arms-control agreements and the entire tone of Soviet-American relations into a new era.

In a series of interviews this week, the Administration officials said they were worried that an outbreak of violence in Lithuania could elevate the Baltic republic's demand for independence to a dominating role in the Soviet-American relationship.

That could derail plans for a June summit meeting and, by implication, set back plans for reducing conventional forces and strategic weapons. A senior Administration official said Friday that the White House would continue to push for a June summit meeting between Mr. Gorbachev and President Bush unless "something tragic happens."

The official said a critical moment in the summit deliberations will come Wednesday, when the Soviet Foreign Minister, Eduard A. Shevardnadze, arrives in Washington for talks that are expected to provide an indispensable step in summit-meeting preparations. The Bush Administration hopes for an agreement on a specific meeting date, which the Soviet Union has been slow to give because of its domestic problems.

Complications for Defense Policy

But expressions of concern about the fallout from events in Lithuania were being expressed here by a wide variety of Democratic leaders and authorities on foreign policy. "The Lithuanian question is overshadowing everything," said Dmitri K. Simes, an expert on the Soviet Union with the Carnegie Endowment for World Peace, "because if the situation is not resolved more or less successfully, nothing else will be doable in the relationship."

On Capitol Hill, leaders on defense policy like Representative Les Aspin and Senator Sam Nunn are speaking of the complicating effect that the Lithuanian crisis could have on a debate over ~~long-range defense policy~~ and on the details of the 1991 defense budget.

Mr. Aspin, the Wisconsin Democrat who chairs the House Armed Services Committee, said the use of force by the Soviet Union to put down the independence movement in Lithuania could dis-

After Lithuania,
will weapons
cuts still
go forward?

rupt Congressional thinking on the "reversability" debate. Presently, the feeling that change in the Soviet Union is irreversible has been strengthening the hand of budget cutters against the more cautious approach urged by Defense Secretary Dick Cheney.

"This really is volatile," Mr. Aspin said. "If Gorbachev uses force to put down Lithuania, all bets are off. You're back to Cheney numbers very quickly."

Soviet Doubts Are Rekindled

To keep the Lithuanian crisis from spoiling Soviet-American relations and interfering with other matters, the Administration has taken a restrained — critics say soft — approach, adopting a "no comment" policy last week after several days of steadily sharpening statements.

The Administration has warned against the use of force or intimidation by the Kremlin, but refused to define those terms and remained silent as Soviet armor rolled through Vilnius and paratroopers raided hospitals in a violent roundup of Lithuanians who fled the Soviet Army ranks.

Despite Washington's official restraint, the public reaction here to the Lithuanian crisis has rekindled expressions of doubt among top Soviet officials about Washington's support for Mr. Gorbachev's changes, according to Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, who met with Mr. Gorbachev this week in Moscow.

Mr. Kennedy said he received numerous assurances that military force would not be used in Lithuania, but that the Kremlin left room to maneuver by adding, "unless the lives of Soviet citizens are threatened."

U.S. Preparations for Setbacks

But it is not only the prospect of military intervention that concerns Administration officials. Even if it does not explode into violence, they do not want the Lithuanian crisis to take center stage in East-West relations. Most immediately, they are anxious that Lithuania not spoil the summit-meeting preparations.

Those concerns have colored all the Administration's actions: its low-key public statements, the decision to give East-West relations and Soviet change a greater priority than immediate Lithuanian independence, the subtle prodding of Lithuanian officials to move carefully, and Mr. Bush's decision to send his letter to Mr. Gorbachev on Thursday.

Mr. Nunn, the Georgia Democrat who chairs the Senate Armed Services Committee, said the Lithuanian crisis had illuminated a critical aspect of the new Soviet-American relationship.

"We have to be prepared for setbacks and we should not get our thinking tuned into nothing but smooth sail-

ing," he said. "The Soviet Union is going to have a lot of turmoil in the next decade. Some of it we will be able to affect and some of it we won't be able to affect and we're going to have to plug that into our strategy."

One Part of Complex Picture

Although Administration officials said they believed the summit preparations are moving forward, they were concerned that if Lithuania becomes the dominant issue in next week's meetings with Mr. Shevardnadze, the pace could be thrown off even if neither side wants that to happen.

That concern was among the reasons that Mr. Bush sent his message to Mr. Gorbachev, officials said. "We'll get a response either before or at the Shevardnadze meeting," an official said. "That sets the issue aside, we hope."

Administration officials argue that Lithuania is but one part of a complex picture. "I don't mean to diminish Lithuania," a senior official said. "But the

fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe were pretty significant events, too."

To keep Lithuania's bid for independence from spoiling Soviet-American relations, the Administration has been walking a tightrope between its 50-year refusal to recognize the Soviet annexation of the Baltic state and modern-day, pragmatic concerns.

Gorbachev and Tough U.S. Talk

Administration officials argue that keeping the Soviet process of change moving will lead to Lithuanian independence more surely than angry denunciations of Moscow. They also say continued change in Eastern Europe and arms control are at stake.

"On the Soviet side of the equation, there is a concern that if our rhetoric was too tough, Gorbachev would just write us off and we'd be cut out of the game," a senior official said. "On the other side, we don't want to embolden the Lithuanians to act on the basis of expecting support from us that is just not there. We don't want another Hungary in 1956, when we recognized a government and the tanks rolled anyway."

That strikes at the core of the debate over Soviet-American relations: How far should the United States go in accommodating Mr. Gorbachev's timetable and actively supporting his programs?

"Gorbachev feels put upon by those that urge restraint and a non-military resolution of what they feel is a matter of internal policy," Senator Kennedy said. "Gorbachev feels generally that he was expecting a little more understanding from the West and they raised several times the question of whether the United States is fully committed to perestroika."

Still, Mr. Simes said, the United States was "looking at the relationship, the Lithuanian problem and the European transition through Gorbachev's perspective." He continued, "The Administration, particularly the State Department, focuses too much on Mr. Gorbachev's fortunes."